

Readers' Theatre – A Viable Activity For Enhancing Various Language Skills in the Classrooms

By Chiu Siu Miu 趙小苗



Readers' Theatre (RT) is a group of two or more readers reading aloud a children story from hand-held scripts. It is similar to a radio play with two or more "actors" and a narrator. The script is read aloud to the audience, not memorized. The actors and the narrator stand in a line facing the audience on the stage. Simple gestures or facial expressions instead of acting movement are used. Multiple readings are required to refine expression and final production is optional. The scripts usually come from children stories adapted by the teacher or students.

Readers' Theatre has the elements of drama as it includes script, characters and narrator. It emphasizes performance skills instead of reading aloud. It is in fact an oral interpretation of a piece of narrative text using the voice, facial expression and hand gesture to portray action. Focus is on interpreting the character's mood and feelings.

What are the benefits of organizing a Readers' Theatre performance in the classroom?

Many skills, including language skills, artistic skills and social skills can be acquired if a Readers' Theatre performance is

used as a learning activity in the classroom. First and foremost is the improvement of reading aloud skills. The teachers in Macau normally would ask the students either individually or in group to read aloud the designated portions of a story in the classroom. This kind of 'round robin' reading does not excite or motivate the students at all. Their boredom is reflected in the monotonous tone of their reading and they always dread doing it.

If the students read according to the assigned story characters for the Readers' Theatre, they should learn to read more effectively and interestingly by interpreting the mood and feelings of the characters. They will be more motivated to read aloud if their performance is well received by the audience. They will also develop a confidence in reading. From constant practice and rehearsal, their reading aloud skills will be much improved.

Other than reading aloud skills, many skills (see Diagram 1) can be enhanced in the learning process. Various language skills such as listening comprehension, writing, or grammar instruction can be made the teaching focus at a specific stage of the lesson development. Art and craft as well as interest in music can also be developed. By working together as a performing team, the students are given the opportunities to develop social skills and team work.

Readers' Theatre

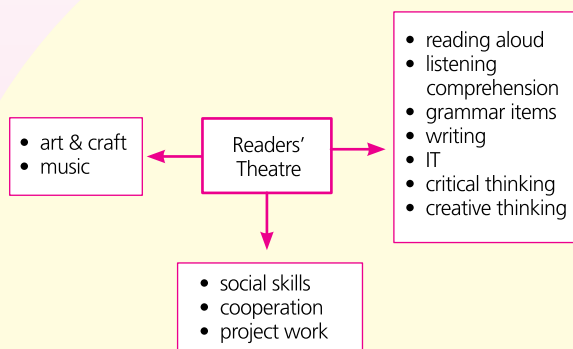


Diagram 1: Various skills acquired from the Readers' Theatre performance

How is Readers' Theatre integrated with other language skills ?

When the teachers make a unit plan before they start teaching a chapter of the textbook, they should have a component of language skills in mind. The development of a unit plan with various language skills is illustrated in Diagram 2. It is highly recommended that the teachers should start the chapter of any textbooks with reading comprehension. The reading text, be it fiction or non-fiction, usually serves as an anchor for the teaching of different language skills. Let's take the story "The Golden Goose" in the New Welcome to English (Longman) 6B Unit 9 as an example. The teachers first go through the story with the students, making sure they comprehend the story. A grammar lesson on the use of adverb will be scheduled right after the reading comprehension lesson, preparing the students for the writing of the Readers' Theatre scripts. The writing of the script will be made the focus of the composition lesson,

changing the story text into a script form. The students will be prepared for the performance by practicing reading aloud of the script. The whole unit of the integrative lessons will take about 6-8 periods.

INTEGRATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING			
reading comprehension	→ grammar	→ writing	→ oral / listening
SAMPLE: NEW WELCOME TO ENGLISH (LONGMAN)			
6B Unit 9 The Golden Goose (~ 2 periods)	→ adverbs (~ 1 period)	changing the story text into a RT script (~ 2 periods)	RT practice & performance (~ 2 periods)

Diagram 2: The development of a unit plan with the integration of various language skills

A step-by-step instructional manual for implementing a Readers' Theatre production

Step one: Write a Readers' Theatre script

As it has been mentioned earlier on, the RT script can be selected by the teachers or written by the students. The teachers can download and assess RT scripts from the internet (see suggested websites in the last section) or create their own. If the teachers decide to guide the students to write a script, they can do the following:

1. Select a story with interesting character dialogue
2. Identify a scene or event (self-contained) which lends itself to performance

- Write out the dialogue in script form with instructions in ():

Alan: (confidently) I know, I know!

Teacher: (annoyed) You always do.
- Write the descriptions and any other information into the narrator's role
- The narrator sets the scene with a brief introduction of characters
- Try out the script and make revisions before using

For example:

THE GOLDEN GOOSE (NEW WELCOME TO ENGLISH 6B CHAPTER 9 P. 50)	
Original text	Readers' theatre script
A woodcutter had three sons, Jack, John and Jim. Jim, the youngest son, was kind and generous but his father and brothers were always unkind to him. "I always have to chop down the biggest tree but I always have the smallest lunch," Jim said to himself.	Narrator 1: A woodcutter had three sons, Jack, John and Jim.
	Narrator 2: Jim, the youngest son, was kind and generous but his father and brothers were always unkind to him.
	Jim: (upset-tingly) I always have to chop down the biggest tree but I always have the smallest lunch.

Step 2: Rehearse the performance

- Have students observe a RT performance (optional)
- Have students read through the script silently for



- meaning interpretation
- Assign character and narrator parts and have students reread their own parts
- First rehearsal reading – provide feedback or oral interpretation of the script
- Second rehearsal reading – to implement the feedback
- Subsequent readings (changing parts if necessary)

Step 3: Stage the performance

The teachers should have some pointers when they guide the students to prepare for the performance. The pointers are made as a director's checklist below.

Director's checklist

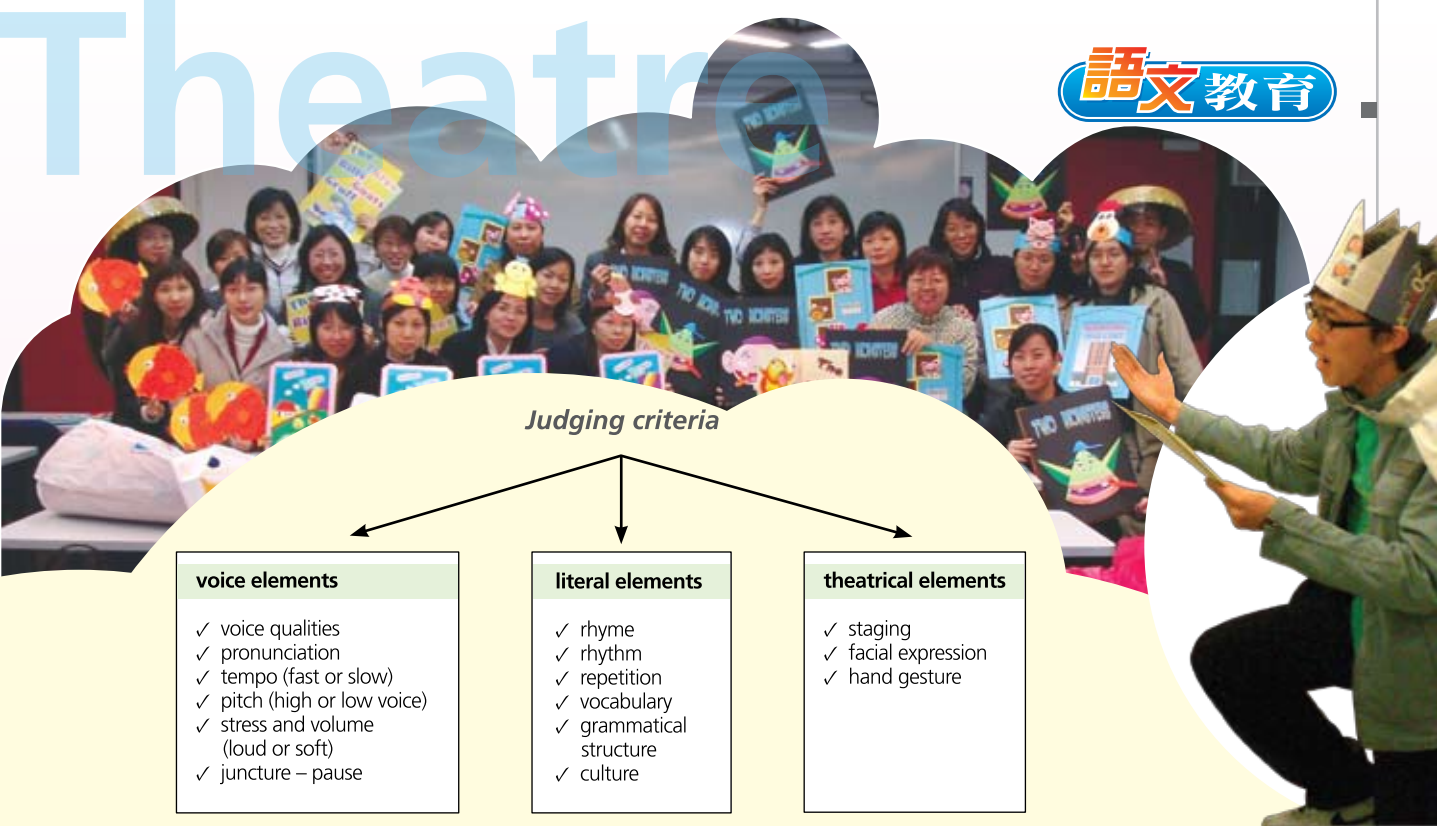
- Can the audience see all the faces?
- Do the readers make the text come alive?
- Do the props help portray the story?
- Does the audience understand the meaning of the story?
- Do you need a narrator to explain events?
- Do the sound effects help the story?
- Are the readers standing or sitting together so that they are close to one another?
- Should the readers stand in straight line?
- Do the readers' faces have expression?
- Should props be used?
- Should readers walk off and station on the stage?

Juror's list

During the performance, the teachers should set some criteria for assessing the performance of the students. Three areas are made the focus and they are the voice elements, literal elements and theatrical elements (see the break down of each element in Diagram 3).

Useful websites for Readers' Theatre

Readers' Theatre has become a popular integrative activity in the classrooms globally.



Judging criteria

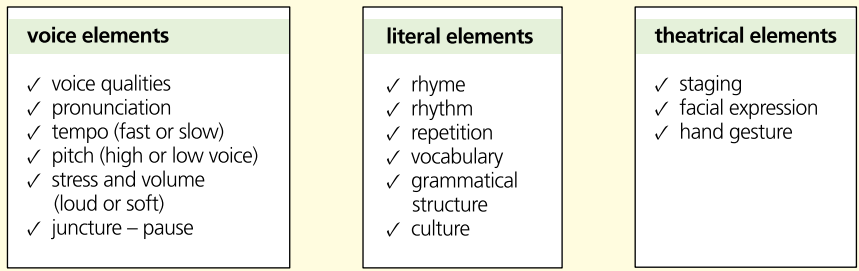


Diagram 3: Criteria for assessing the performance of the Readers' Theatre

Many interesting websites are developed in recent years to promote the use of the Readers' Theatre. The teachers will find the following websites resourceful.

- <http://www.aaronshp.com/rt/index.html>
- <http://www.geocities.com/rtscripts>
- <http://www.curriculum.edu.au/accessasia/catalog/readers.html>
- http://www.scriptsforschools.com/ALL_SCRIPTS/FREE_TEACHER_AIDES/Sample_Read-Along_Scripts/THE_GRASSHOPPER/the_grasshopper.html

CONCLUSION

More teachers in Macau have become adventurous by trying out various activities to enhance their teaching of English in the classrooms. The purpose for introducing the Readers'

Theatre as a viable integrative activity is to help make the learning of the language interesting and effective. It is only when the students find their learning interesting that they will enjoy more learning English in the classrooms. 🌱

(Dr Chiu Siu Miu 趙小苗, Faculty of Education, University of Macau)

REFERENCES

1. Gunning, T. G. 1996. *Creating reading instruction for all children*. 2nd Ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon. pp. 358-359.
2. *New Welcome to English series published by Longman.*
3. Tompkins, G. E. 1998. *Language arts: Content and teaching strategies*. 4th Ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. pp. 316-318.
4. Wong, R. Y. L. *Enhancing language teaching and learning through readers' theatre: A fun and not so painful way of learning language*. In Hunter, M-A (ed.) 2000. *Development through drama: towards providing a holistic education in Singapore schools*. Singapore: The Necessary Stage.

